Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 22: Public Transit

Guests: Maria Sotnikova and Alejandra Ospina

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey there! Welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Today's episode is about public transit focusing on two systems: MARTA, the transit system in Atlanta, Georgia, and the MTA, in New York City. It's easy to complain about public transit, but for so many populations, including low-income people, older adults, and people with disabilities, it's the only option available.

Maria Sotnikova and Alejandra Ospina are my guests, and they share their experiences using different forms of transit from these two systems. They'll also talk about larger systemic issues about accessibility and infrastructure in these two metropolitan areas. By the way, throughout this episode you may hear a few moments where the audio drops when I talk. Are you ready? Away we go!

Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

[train passes on a bridge, fading into mellow ambient music]

Introduction to Maria and Atlanta-area public transit, MARTA

ALICE: So, Maria, thank you so much for joining me on my podcast today. Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself and what you do?

MARIA SOTNIKOVA: I am a data scientist at the Atlanta Regional Commission. I am a Certified Urban Planner, and I have a bit of a policy wonk side too. My primary research focus is basically issues that persons with disabilities and older adults face with regard to urban planning.

ALICE: I think people don't realize—you know, you and I are wheelchair users—and that a lot of people just who are wheelchair users can't afford a modified vehicle because they're upward of $40-50,000. And public transit is, for all kinds of people with disabilities, it's the only option.

MARIA: Yeah, I agree! Transportation is one of the keys to being independent, to being able to have autonomy.

ALICE: What are your main forms of transportation?

MARIA: So, I'm very fortunate in that I was able to access funding for the modification of my own personal vehicle. But when that vehicle is not working, I rely on the public transportation system here, where I'm based, in Atlanta.

Our system is called MARTA, and it is composed of heavy rail as well as buses and complementary ADA paratransit buses. I primarily use the rail. I personally do not use the fixed-route buses or the paratransit door-to-door MARTA options. I have some unpleasant, triggering moments related to just growing up and having to ride on school buses where I felt unsafe.

My disability is primarily neuromuscular. That means that I have very weak muscles, and as a result, my balance is not great. So, in sitting on a bus where there might be some bumps in the road that might shake the bus, I get shaking quite a bit. For that reason, I strongly prefer to take rail, which is typically a smoother ride, as far as public transit goes, or to ride my own personal vehicle, which also is much smoother.

ALICE: Great. Thank you for that. So, about the rail system, are all the stops in the rail system in MARTA, are there accessible platforms?

MARIA: Yes. So, the MARTA system was developed around the 1970s. All of its stations were equipped with elevators and modern amenities, even though they were prior to ADA. The elevators, for the most part, typically work. Their elevator statuses are embedded into their proprietary app that you can use to see, and I think they're also listed on the website.

[bright acoustic guitar music]

ALICE: So, for folks who are unfamiliar with the city of Atlanta, how would you describe the metropolitan area?

MARIA: Atlanta is very large. Our transportation planning efforts cover 23 counties. It's basically most of North Georgia. [chuckles] The City of Atlanta is split between two counties: Fulton County and DeKalb County. The MARTA system is in Fulton County, DeKalb County, and it was recently adopted by Clayton County, which sits directly to the south of both of those areas.

There are other adjacent counties, and they have their own transit systems. The other areas and the other counties in the 23-county region typically do not have their own significant public transportation services. They might have some express services from suburban and exurban counties into the central business district of downtown Atlanta. For the most part, the major systems are MARTA, and then Cobb County transportation and Gwinnett County.

They do have some agreements where you can connect from MARTA to Cobb and from MARTA to Gwinnett and vice versa.

[bright acoustic guitar music]

Recommendations for how to better serve under-served populations

ALICE: You worked on a plan called Managing Mobility in the Atlanta Region. What were some of the recommendations that you and your colleagues made in terms of ways to better serve under-served populations?

MARIA: I mean, one of the things that we brought up was having a unified application process so that if you applied for paratransit with MARTA or with Cobb, that it be eligible in other systems as well. Another thing that we suggested was to have a common fare structure, and there is some work being done currently to move this along where, if you have a MARTA fare card, you can use that everywhere. And another thing that we recommended was to basically also unify the type of data collection that systems currently collect, as well as the technology that they use to collect that data.

So, our over-arching suggestion is to standardize and to have everyone be on the same page.

ALICE: That makes total sense. Who are the most under-served folks who still face barriers when using public transportation?

MARIA: Most commonly, people are talking about those that are 65 and older, persons with disabilities of any age, and persons with low income. In addition to looking at those populations, we also held meetings with stakeholders from Veterans' groups and low-English proficiency organizations and folks that have low English proficiency.

There are two primary characteristics that affect access to transportation: Income and disability. And being an older adult, having low English proficiency, and Veteran status often feed into those. And so, it's really hard to say what community, as a whole, is greater affected by it just because the Atlanta region is so diverse, and there are so many factors that influence people's access to transportation.

When you look into these populations as a whole, they make up about at least 1/3 of all residents in the region. So, it's a major voting bloc, it's a major part of our community, and these are barriers that should not be ignored.

ALICE: I agree.

[mellow ambient music]

Challenges to accessibility and being engaged for public transit change

ALICE: Why do you think accessibility still is such a challenge?

MARIA: I can say for the Atlanta region, part of it is definitely the fact that, as a region, we are very fragmented. It's composed of rural, exurban, suburban, and urban land types, and we have

a lot of municipalities in the region as well. So, getting everyone together is even a challenge. Getting everyone to agree to do something, that's even more so.

Beyond the local aspect of public transit, there's a lot of state level and federal level policy and funding that goes into make these systems function. So, there are lots of opportunities for people to intervene and make your voices heard. To speak up and to you know, make change happen.

Not everyone is aware of all the options that are out there. There could be greater awareness of the people that are being under-served as well. So, just educating yourself on what public transportation is, who runs it, who funds it, how do you speak up, who do you speak up to? It's very important that, if we wanna see positive change, we start to think about how public transportation operates systemically and incrementally try to adjust the system to better fit out needs.

ALICE: Maria, thank you so much for talking with me and sharing your story with us.

[dull roar of air through a subway tunnel]

SUBWAY ANNOUNCEMENT: Ladies and Gentlemen, the next L Train is now arriving on the Manhattan-bound track.

[subway starts to roar into the station]

Please stand away from the platform edge.

[slow, jaunty music comes in as train fades out]

Introduction to Alejandra Ospina and New York City public transit, the MTA

ALICE: Let's hear from our next guest, Alejandra, about public transportation in New York City.

So, Alejandra, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today. Why don't you introduce yourself, if you don't mind?

ALEJANDRA OSPINA: Sure, my name is Alejandra Ospina, and I live in New York City. I've lived here my whole life. I'm a wheelchair user, I'm a person of color, and also a subway user.

ALICE: So, why don't we start off with, I guess, talking about the MTA, which is the public transit provider or system.

ALEJANDRA: Right. The Metropolitan Transit Authority. The MTA covers all of the public transit in New York City, which is basically a network of buses and a network of subways. And the entire bus fleet was made accessible really, probably by, or shortly, after roughly 1981. The subway system is a very different matter. I would say that there are roughly just under 500 subway stations throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Staten Island has its own mini-branch of the subway system, the Staten Island Railroad. And a very small percentage of subway stations are wheelchair accessible or have elevators.

So, there are supposed to be 100 key subway stations that are accessible by the year 2020, but 100 is a fraction of the number of subway stations that we have. There's a larger concentration of accessible subway stations in Manhattan because Manhattan is where everything happens. Manhattan is where the money is.

So, I have to go online and look at a listing that's maintained by the MTA of elevator outages and then check if my elevators are out that I need. And then there's the matter of the platforms themselves. For a lot of wheelchair users, these are some very narrow and kinda dangerous platforms.

Access issues with boarding the subway

ALICE: Can you describe the platform? I do know that a lot of platforms in various systems, there's a gap between the car and the platform.

ALEJANDRA: It can be a real problem. First, you have to make sure that you are at an accessible station with what they have decided is an accessible platform. And that is only in one spot where you can get on a train if you're a wheelchair user, and that's the center of the train where the conductor car is. So, where you see a conductor stick their head out when the train stops, that is where you can board.

ALICE: Wow! I didn't know that!

ALEJANDRA: Yeah, and a lot of folks don't. I mean, you can find this information on the MTA website, but it's not commonly known. So, that's one thing. You have to be in that middle spot where, presumably, the platform will be higher than it is on the rest of the platform. And that's not consistent in every accessible station. That's gonna be in a different spot. You have to be able to see because it's a sign that hangs down from the ceiling that says, "Boarding area." sometimes, where that sign is hanging down from the ceiling that says "Boarding area" is not actually where that conductor car stops.

ALICE: Are there times when you're at the right spot, you made it there, and then the train—

ALEJANDRA: And then the train isn't, yeah. That happens often. They're not gonna correct anything for you or wait for you. If you didn't get on, you didn't get on. And if you need help to get on, or if you get stuck getting on, you're kind of at the mercy of whoever's around. So, if you end up on an accessible platform with a train that stops in the right spot, that still doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to not have a gap or not have a gap and a step. So, it's really a crap shoot. It really is.

[up-tempo soul]

Assumptions about disabled people's lives and travel needs

ALICE: You know, everybody says, "Oh, the bus systems: Take the bus. Take the bus because there's so many stops, there are so many lines." They always say like, "Avoid the subways." But then, that doesn't give incentive for the system to actually change.

ALEJANDRA: No, it really doesn't. It's part of that sort of deep down assumption that disabled folks have all the time in the world anyway 'cause what the hell else are we doing, you know?

ALICE: Well, yeah, or the idea that we only go out for our doctors' appointments, right?

ALEJANDRA: Right, right. The assumption is, well, that's what paratransit is for. And of course, we all know that that's separate and unequal and has so many problems on its own. And buses in New York take a really, really long time to get anywhere. It can take, you know, an hour on a New York City bus to travel a mile.

ALICE: Do you get like dirty looks like, oh, we have to move? We have to make space for you? Because that's a vibe I get a lot.

ALEJANDRA: Yes.

ALICE: Whenever I'm out in public, it's like, how dare this wheelchair user take up this space!

ALEJANDRA: We're used to all kinds of folks and the stuff that they carry, and just all kinds of things appear on subway cars. OK, I'm speaking for myself: I don't get that many dirty looks, but I get lots of butts and crotches in my arm and hands and face. It's a stressful environment.

[crowds chatting on a subway platform, a trumpet player in the distance]

ALICE: And also, making your way through the crowds. I think—

ALEJANDRA: Yeah, yeah.

ALICE: That, to me, is the hardest part. Like, move out of my fucking way!

ALEJANDRA: Yeah! Yeah, I have many, many move out of my fucking way moments every time I take the train!

ALICE: It seems like you have to be really assertive—

ALEJANDRA: Yeah, oh, yeah.

ALICE: —really organized and not afraid to kind of take up space. You know, so many people with all kinds of disabilities, not just wheelchair users, but they're made to feel uncomfortable, like they take up too much space.

ALEJANDRA: Oh, yeah, you're always being told that you're a fire hazard or that you shouldn't sit there or that that space is for someone else. Yeah, oh, yeah.

[pleasant piano waltz]

Advice for people with disabilities interested in trying NYC subways

ALICE: So, what is your advice for, let's say, people with disabilities who are interested in trying to ride the subway system in New York City?

ALEJANDRA: If you're only going to be here for a few days, then I would say, "You know what? Take the bus. It's safer. It's gonna take you a little longer, but you're on vacation, right, presumably, so you have the time." This is the other thing: We do have reduced fare cards. New York City subway system uses a Metro card. Unfortunately, you cannot purchase a reduced fare Metro card from the machines where everybody else buys their Metro cards.

ALICE: Oh, of course not!

ALEJANDRA: That's another pain in the ass and a half. That's another reason why I would generally advise taking the bus for a short-term stay, because wheelchair users boarding a bus, they simply won't be asked their fare by the bus driver. In the subway system, that's a different story because you have to go through a turnstile. An accessible station will have what's called an auto-gate. And an auto-gate will only accept an auto-gate Metro card that a wheelchair user will have received through the arduous application process with the MTA. You can get one in the short-term, but it requires going to a very specific office in downtown Manhattan, which is another thing that most people wouldn't know if they didn't already know.

So, if you really, really wanna use the subway in New York, and you're a wheelchair user, and you plan to be here more than a few days, definitely swing by MTA.info and read up everything that you can. Get in touch with someone who knows. I would recommend calling one of our local Independent Living Centers. And they should be able to provide you with some information. Plenty of people have these questions.

Systemic issues, ableism, and lawsuits against the MTA

ALICE: And I wanna segue into systemic issues. So, the MTA, there's two lawsuits, and also recently, I just saw an article about, I think, one of the board members or Commissioners of the MTA, like there's a recent public meeting.

ALEJANDRA: Oh, yeah! That guy! Lhota. He's a piece of work. Yep. I think he said, "As if I don't have enough fucking problems" or something like that.

ALICE: It's like the lowest of priorities, and what would you wanna say to the Commissioners or the board members, the people who govern in terms of getting their act together on really being able to serve people with disabilities in the New York City metro area?

ALEJANDRA: The subway system and the MTA in general is plagued with problems, not just accessibility. But to him, you know, I would say, "I'm super happy for you, Mr. Lhota, that you have the privilege of not knowing what it's like to need an accessible transportation system. And I'm really happy for you." People don't make accessibility a priority unless and until it directly affects them. To know what it's like not to be able to use something that a majority of the population can use. Given that paratransit, Access-A-Ride is supposed to be our main alternative that we're supposed to be happy with and shut up and use, I would love for all of those folks to have to schedule all of their rides 1-2 days in advance and wait anywhere between ½ hour to 3 hours even to be picked up and to be driven around the entire city before they even get to their destination. No non-disabled commuter would find that acceptable.

ALICE: Exactly.

ALEJANDRA: You know, no non-disabled commuter would find it acceptable to get to their subway station and say, “Oh, shit. Oh well, I guess I can’t go where I’m going. Oh well. I guess I’ll have to do a workaround that involves going through half of a borough to come back in the opposite direction.”

ALICE: A better system will serve all people better.

ALEJANDRA: Absolutely. It’s like Universal Design. Universal Design would improve quality of life for everyone. Accessible subway system would improve the quality of commutes for everyone, but disability is still so removed from most people’s lives. It’s still such an alien concept. They either think it’s not possible, or they assume that the system must be as accessible to me as it is to them.

ALICE: Or then they think you’re so inspirational.

ALEJANDRA: Yes!

ALICE: You are so brave, Alejandra!

ALEJANDRA: I can’t— You know, yeah, it’s, I can’t believe it! I’m so brave riding the subway! But honestly, as shitty a system as it is, sometimes I kind of am.

ALICE: Yeah. In this time period, you are.

ALEJANDRA: Yeah.

ALICE: And you know, it’s just so, to me, bitterly ironic that here we are, 27 years after the ADA, and we still have to fight for the basic right to be visible and users of public transit, emphasis on the word “public,” for everyone. And it’s really a misnomer when we still have so many systems and barriers where we’re really not considered part of the public.

[slow, jaunty music]

Disability visibility on transit

ALEJANDRA: As much as I don’t want my daily life to become a series of teaching moments for the non-disabled public, that is part of the reason that I’m insistent on riding the subway. Because you know what? I want y’all to see me. I’m here. I’m on this train. I exist. We exist. I’m not going anywhere. I’m not the first. I’m not the last. So, you know, visibility. There it is again.

ALICE: Disability visibility! Woo woo!

ALEJANDRA: There we are!

ALICE: That’s a great way to tie it up. Well, Alejandra, thank you so much for sharing your story with me.

ALEJANDRA: Thank you so much, Alice, for inviting me to be on your podcast.

Wrap-up

[hip-hop music]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/.

You can find links to reports and other resources Maria and Alejandra mentioned on our website. And be sure to check out our next episode on paratransit.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Bye!

♪ It's hard out here for a gimp ♪